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Russian Urban Tactics:

Lessons from the Battle for Grozny

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Note

Background

Conclusions

Initial Troubles. When the Chechen troubles began, the Russian Army had been operating with little money and bare bones logistical support. It had not conducted a regiment- or division-scale field training exercise in over two years, and its battalions were lucky to conduct field training once a year. Most battalions were manned at 55% or less. Approximately 85% of Russian youth were exempt or deferred from the draft, forcing the army to accept conscripts with criminal records, health problems or mental incapacity. The Russian Army lacked housing for its officers and had trouble adequately feeding and paying its soldiers. It invaded Chechnya with a rag-tag collection of various units, without an adequate support base. When the Chechens stood their ground, the sorry state of the Russian Army became apparent to the world.

Before invading with regular forces, the Russians had trained and supplied the rebel Chechen forces that were hostile to the incumbent Chechen government. A force of 5,000 Chechen rebels and 85 Russian soldiers with 170 Russian tanks attempted to overthrow the Chechen government with a *coup de main* by capturing Grozny "from the march" as they had in years past captured Prague and Kabul. They failed and lost 67 tanks in city fighting.

A Second Mistake. Instead of regrouping and waiting to regain surprise, Russian leaders ordered the army into Chechnya with no fully ready divisions. The Russian Army was forced to combine small units and send them to fight. Infantry fighting vehicles went to war with their crews, but with little or no infantry on board. In some cases, officers drove because soldiers were not available. Intelligence on the situation in Grozny was inadequate. Only a few large-scale maps were available, and there were *no* maps available to tactical commanders. To make matters worse, because the city was not surrounded and cut off, the Chechen government was able to reinforce its forces throughout the battle.

When the Russians first attempted to seize Grozny the last day of 1994, they tried to do it with tanks and personnel carriers but without enough supporting infantry. The available infantry had just been thrown together, and many did not know even the last names of their fellow soldiers. They were told that they were part of a police action. Some did not have weapons. Many were sleeping in the carriers even as the columns rolled into Grozny. Tank crews had no machine gun ammunition. Lax preparation for this

assault reflected the attitude of the defense minister, General Pavel Grachev, who had boasted earlier that month that he could seize Grozny in two hours with one parachute regiment. So the Russians drove into Grozny expecting to capture the city center and seat of government with only token resistance.

But, tanks and personnel carriers, in the city without dismounted infantry support, were easy targets to antitank gunners firing from the flanks or from above. The initial Russian armored columns were swallowed up in the city streets and destroyed by Chechen gunners.

After losing 105 of 120 tanks and personnel carriers the Russians fell back to consolidate for the long, building-by-building battle.

Planning for Urban Combat. Russian intelligence missed the rapid construction of robust Chechen defenses in Grozny. The Russian columns, moving on parallel but nonsupporting axes, were cut off and destroyed by Chechen forces. Russian planners concluded that high-tempo mounted thrusts to seize defended cities are both ineffective and unjustified in terms of the attrition of personnel and equipment. They concluded that contemporary urban combat requires the following steps.

1. All approaches to the city must be sealed off while detailed reconnaissance proceeds.
2. Key installations and buildings on the outskirts of the city must be taken once artillery has suppressed defenders and assault positions have been occupied.
3. The city's residential, industrial and central sections must be taken successively.
4. Trapped enemy units must be eliminated, mines cleared, weapons collected and military control and curfew established.

These steps obviously suggest to planners that the first objective should be major industrial plants on the outskirts of cities covering axes into the city. Because such plants, with their concrete and stone walls and underground rooms and passages, are ideal for a lengthy, stubborn defense they must be captured before the city can be attacked. Within the city, attacking forces must anticipate (1) defending tanks and direct-fire artillery in corner buildings or behind breaks in walls, (2) dismounted infantry on any story of buildings, (3) snipers and artillery observers in high-rise buildings, attics, and towers.

Collateral damage, not a major consideration when fighting on foreign soil, becomes a particular worry when fighting in your own cities where your own people live.

Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield. The Russians did their initial planning on 1:50,000 and 1:100,000 scale maps. They lacked necessary, detailed, larger-scale maps in scale 1:25,000 or 1:12,500. Essential aerial photographs were not available for planning, because Russian satellites had been turned off to save money and few aerial photography missions were flown. Lower-level troop commanders never received vital aerial photographs and large-scale maps.

Despite the unclear intelligence picture, planners failed to take elementary precautions or to forecast how the Chechens might defend the city. As the Russian columns moved to Grozny, they were surprised by snipers, road blocks and other signs of Chechen determination to defend the city.

Storm Groups and Detachments. Soviet and Russian tactical methodology called for organizing storm groups and storm detachments for city fighting. A storm group is usually a motorized rifle company reinforced with a tank platoon, artillery battery, mortar platoon, AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher platoon, engineer platoon and chemical troops. It advances with a covering and consolidation group (a motorized rifle platoon reinforced with antitank guns, grenade launchers and 82mm mortars) and an

obstacle clearing party (combat engineers and mine-sweeping tanks). A storm detachment is usually a motorized rifle battalion reinforced with at least a battalion of artillery, a tank company, an engineer company, an air defense platoon, flamethrower squads and smoke generator personnel. Artillery and air support are available from division assets.

Although storm groups and detachments were formed for urban combat following the New Year's Eve defeat, their formation was often counterproductive because it destroyed what unit integrity existed in platoons, companies and battalions and gave commanders more assets than they could readily deploy and control. It would have been better to use the standard tactical unit, then reinforce it with select weapons systems where needed. For example, a motorized rifle platoon could field storm squads and cover and support squads, and a motorized rifle company could field storm platoons and cover and support platoons. The cover and support units would pin the enemy down by fire while the storm unit attacked. After the attack, the cover and support unit would become a reserve.

Early Lessons. The Russians successfully used direct-fire artillery, RPGs, automatic grenade fire and machine gun fire to pin-down the Chechens while attacking through smoke to seize a building. They tossed grenades through windows and doors before entering.

Engineers effectively blew entry ways into the walls. Two three-man combat teams cleared each room. Once a building was captured, it was prepared for defense. Sewer approaches and enemy approach paths were mined and booby trapped.

Since the battle for a city continues non-stop, the Russians learned that they needed fresh troops and adequate reserves. Soviet doctrine called for a 4:1 advantage in troops for urban combat. Some 60,000 Russians and 12,000 Chechens fought in Grozny, yet the Russian's 5:1 advantage was sometimes not enough, because they had to guard every building that they took.

The Russians also learned that troops need to wear something distinctive (and easily changeable) during the assault to avoid fratricide.

Tactics, Techniques and Procedures. Soviet and Russian tactics specified that tanks would lead the assault in city fighting followed by infantry fighting vehicles and dismounted infantry. Tank columns would move in herringbone formation along city streets. This proved disastrous in Grozny where the high density of antitank weapons threatened armored vehicles, while the depression and elevation limitations of Russian tank guns kept them from engaging targets located in basements or in the upper floors of multi-storied buildings. Antiaircraft guns, such as the ZSU23-4 and 2S6, were effective against these targets. In Grozny, tanks and personnel carriers were formed into armored groups used to seal off captured areas, serve as a counterattack force, provide security for rear installations and support advancing infantry from outside the range of enemy antitank weapons.

The Russians began to take special precautions to protect their tanks and personnel carriers. Besides keeping them behind the infantry, they outfitted some with a cage of wire mesh some 25-30 centimeters away from the hull armor. These cages can defeat the shaped charge of the RPG-7 antitank grenade launcher, as well as protecting the vehicle from a Molotov cocktail or a bundle of antitank grenades. The Chechens fielded antitank hunter killer teams which moved toward the sound of engine noise to kill armored vehicles with volley RPG-7 antitank fire from above, the flanks and behind. The Russians learned to counter these teams by establishing ambushes on all approach routes and then running vehicles into selected areas as bait.

City fighting in Grozny required much larger stocks of hand grenades, smoke grenades, demolition charges and disposable, one-shot antitank grenade launchers (similar to the U.S. light anti-ank weapon) than expected. Each infantry soldier needed a rope with a grappling hook for entering buildings. Light-weight ladders were also very valuable for assaulting infantry. Trained snipers were essential, but were in short supply.

Tank-mounted and dismounted searchlights were useful for night assault in the city. Searchlights (as well as pyrotechnics) temporarily blinded enemy night-vision equipment and dazzled enemy gunners. They produced a psychological attack against the enemy, while helping prevent fratricide in the assault.

Artillery. The Russians learned that conventional artillery fires are best used while approaching the city and while capturing the city outskirts. Then, they would deploy the bulk of their self-propelled artillery in direct-fire support of tanks and infantry. Because massed artillery fires create rubble in the very areas through which a force wants to advance, direct-fire is preferable. Direct fire can be conducted by guns, howitzers, multiple rocket launchers and the 82mm Vasilek automatic mortar. When Russian forces arrived at Grozny, they had few fire support coordinators and forward air controllers. Motorized rifle officers were not skilled in adjusting indirect artillery fire, but could readily aim and adjust direct fire.

Air Power. The Russians used a lot of fixed-wing aircraft, but they were of limited tactical value in Grozny. They were used to provide support while artillery was moved into range. Because air strikes could not be precisely targeted, attack fighter bombers concentrated on large "free-fire" zones. Fixed-wing aircraft proved of more value in attacking targets outside the city.

Helicopter gunships were of much more value. They were used against snipers and weapons in the upper floors. The helicopters flew in behind captured high-rise buildings and would "pop-up" to engage these targets, but had to fly to and from the engagement area using the shelter of captured buildings.

Smoke and Tear-Gas. Smoke and white phosphorus rounds were useful in Grozny. White phosphorus, which burns upon explosion, creates a smoke screen and, because smoke is essential for movement in city fighting, every fourth or fifth Russian artillery or mortar round fired was a smoke or white phosphorus round. The Russians point out a side benefit of white phosphorus is that white phosphorus smoke is toxic and readily penetrates protective mask filters. White phosphorus is not banned by any treaty. Tear gas grenades were also useful in the fighting in Grozny.

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